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Comments on McGraw, "Against the Combination of Materialism and Direct Realism"

In his contribution "Against the Combination of Materialism and Direct Realism", David McGraw argues that direct realism conflicts with materialism. There are fundamental differences between the phenomenal qualities of our perceptual experiences and the properties of the physical things we perceive. So the attempt to spell out the phenomenal character of perceptual experience in terms of features of the things we experience is bound to lead to trouble for a proponent of materialism.

In this comment, I will argue that there need not be any conflict between direct realism and materialism, given a proper understanding of direct realism and the replies available to the view.

McGraw holds that, when a subject sees a wall, she has a visual impression of it, in virtue of which she perceives the actual wall. He argues that the impression is numerically distinct from the wall by pointing out that the wall keeps on existing when the subject looks away and thus loses the impression. The impression is within the perceiver, according to McGraw.

The claim that there is a visual impression could be interpreted in at least two ways. On the one hand, it might be the claim that when the subject sees the wall, she undergoes a *visual mental state*. If this is the reading McGraw intends, his claim seems correct yet unsurprising: Certainly, while seeing a wall presupposes that there is a wall, it is not the same as a wall. The former is a mental event or state of the subject, the latter a (distinct) object in the world. Direct realists are not concerned with denying that there is a difference here.

The problem one might raise for a materialist with regard to the phenomenal qualities of perceptual states is the traditional worry of how phenomenal properties can be reduced to material or physical properties of the subject, such as functional properties or neural properties. One response to this problem that is available to direct realists with materialist commitments is to deny that there are any phenomenal properties of experience. This has been argued by Tye (2000) by appeal to the argument from transparency, for instance. (The argument says that there is no introspective evidence of qualia as intrinsic features of experience: When I try to focus on the phenomenal properties involved in experience, I inexorably end up with what experience presents as features of objects out there.) Crudely put, Tye's point is that the phenomenal character of experience is not to be understood in terms of qualitative properties that the experience *itself* has, but has to be reduced to what it represents, its content.

On the other hand, the visual impression might be the direct *object* sensed by the subject, something along the lines of a sense-datum. Taken this way, McGraw's claim comes down to the indirect realist position that we are confronted with things in the world only indirectly, by immediately being in touch with sense-data, ideas, or the like. As far as I can tell, this is the claim he is making. Compare the following quote (p. 3): "Human subjects are aware of the colors and other attributes that belong to physical objects as physical only by starting with phenomenal colors and attributes." According to McGraw, this is an undeniable fact about perceptual experience. But this is exactly what direct realism is committed to denying. On this view, what we are directly aware of in perception are features of the things we perceive themselves. There *are no* impressions within in the perceiver that mediate her perception of her surroundings. In light of this, there is no need to worry about whether they, by contrast with worldly objects, stop existing when the subject looks away. If McGraw wants to argue otherwise, he needs to provide reasons why we should introduce such entities as impressions into our ontology in the first place.

But isn't there still a problem for the direct realist? She says that the phenomenal character of perceptual experience is due to its object or content. (The exact claim varies, for instance between intentionalist versions of direct realism such as Tye's and naïve realist versions like Mike Martin's (1997).) But, as McGraw argues, the features of physical things that we perceive are often categorically different from how these things strike us. For example, temperature is a statistical property and color a complicated reflectance property, even though the warmth I feel or the shade of red that I see appear to be simple features of things around me. (p. 4) While it would take me too far afield to elaborate on direct realist responses to this problem, let me point out that they can insist that we perceive complicated dispositional or statistical properties by perceiving their concrete manifestations. These manifestations are concrete properties instantiated by the perceived objects, so it is not surprising that they appear to be simple, intrinsic properties. Further, direct realists don't have to claim that our perceptual experiences give us full and transparent disclosure of the things they represent, including their physical structure or statistical properties.

A different response available to direct realists is to endorse a non-reductive materialism. John McDowell (1994), for instance, seems to be open to this view, which appeals to different, equally correct levels of description and explanation of reality. The undeniable directness of our perceptual engagement with the world is captured at the *personal* level of explanation. This doesn't conflict with the correctness of explanations at *subpersonal* levels of explanation, all the way down to the quantum level, that describe and explain the world by appeal not to mid-sized objects, but to atoms or the like.

What about the fact that the *phenomenal character* of seeing a wall vanishes once the subject looks away from the wall, whereas the wall, including its perceptible features, continues to exist? Doesn't this show that the phenomenal character of the subject's visual experience cannot arise from the wall and its properties? Direct realists can reply that the wall's visible features give rise to the phenomenal character of an experience of looking at the wall only when there is such an experience. But even when the subject looks away, the wall has these features that are available for her to perceive. It is in virtue of presenting her with these features that *this* is exactly what it is like for her to undergo the visual experience of the wall.

Towards the end of his contribution, McGraw himself appears to endorse a version of direct realism. He claims – quite plausibly – that the processes going on in the perceptual system are not something that obstructs the perceiver's contact with her surroundings. He also accepts the argument from transparency. I am not sure how to square these statements with his claim, quoted above, that we become aware of things in the world and their properties only via our contact with the phenomenal qualities of intra-mental impressions. Let me end my comment by suggesting that he should give up on this latter claim in favor of an all-out direct realist picture of perception.

References

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